

MATTHEW ARNOLD'S "SOHRAB AND RUSTUM": AN EASTERN TALE

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ABSTRACT

"Sohrab and Rustum" derived from the legendary heroic materials embodied in John Malcolm's *History of Persia*, Alexander Burne's familiar *Travels into Bokhara* (especially for the description of the Oxus) and J.A. Atkinson's translation of Firdousi's *Shahnamah* Rustum and Sohrab, both display a pride and a fierceness that belong as much to the *Iliad* as to the *Shahnamah*, for these are indispensable common properties of the epic. The spirit of action in both the valiant warriors is tremendous. Their love and fierceness for action and duty is very similar to what Krishna wants Arjuna to learn in the *Gita* "Do thine allotted task!" Both the father and the son do not, for a single moment, think about the consequences, but are haunted by the fierceness of action. Satisfying the conditions laid by him in the Preface, the poem has no introspective brooding upon the poet's mental development—no sickly analysis of his "misery's birth and growth." From beginning to end, the poem is concerned with human actions and human situations.

KEYWORDS: Arnold, Firdausi, *Gita*, Rustum, Sohrab

INTRODUCTION

The famous Preface to Matthew Arnold's *Poems* of 1853, his first published piece of prose, was a manifesto of the modern classicism that he had arrived at. It was an assertion of classical principles aimed at critics, readers and poets committed to the kind of Romantic poetry represented by Keats and by implication, Tennyson and Alexander Smith. More important, it was a defense of the conception of poetry implicit in his poem "Sohrab and Rustum."

"Sohrab and Rustum" was the principal piece of the volume. It illustrates all three of the principles laid down in the preface. In the first place, its subject is an action, not his own feelings, and the action was "a thoroughly good one." The story is derived from the legendary heroic materials embodied in the tenth-century epic of Firdausi, *Shahnamah* or *Book of Kings*. In 1853, a French gentleman named M. Mohl brought out an edition of the *Shahnamah* together with a prose translation of the same. The great French critic, Saint Beuve gave an analysis of the whole episode of "Sohrab and Rustum," using in the course, large extracts from the translation of Mohl. His essay, "*Le Livre des Rois, par Firdousi*," attracted the attention of Arnold and furnished him with the material and inspiration for writing the poem. The essay gave him, as he later told Sainte-Beuve, "courage de commencer enfin mon poème"¹ and his courage rose without more help from Firdausi. He never read more than a few paragraphs in translation of the Persian myth about the Tartar Sohrab, killed in a duel by his own father Rustum, the Persian. It was Saint Beuve's account of Firdausi which fastened on him.

He worked lovingly at the poem from the end of 1852 to the spring of 1853, "putting together," as Kenneth Allott says, "the stages of his story with admirable narrative carpentry, orientalizing his Homeric similes,"² by drawing on John Malcolm's *History of Persia*, Alexander Burne's familiar *Travels into Bokhara* (especially for the description of the Oxus)

and J.A. Atkinson's translation of Firdousi's *Shahanamah*, and attempting throughout to keep strictly to the principles of 1853 Preface.

Arnold had read several books on the oriental thought. More especially his keen interest in the *Bhagavad Gita* and Buddhism influenced his poetry to a large extent. The *Lists of Reading* compiled by Lowry, Young and Dunn further reveal that he was deeply associated with the literature of the East. Besides reading Malcolm's *History of Persia* vol. (i) in December 1852, he is reported to have read several other important and interesting studies about the Eastern lands and culture. For instance, the reading-list mentions Ferrier's *Caravan Journeys and Wanderings in Persia, Afghanistan, Turkistan, and Baloochistan*, and MacGregor's *Narrative of a Journey Through the Province of Khorassan and on the N.W. Frontier of Afghanistan*, 2 vols. Although these books are reported to have been read by Arnold around 1857, after his poem "Sohrab and Rustum" had been published, but they prove the fact that he wanted to know more about the legends, tales, cultures and races of the East. It is very likely that the poem itself aroused the curiosity to know more about the strange and adventurous tales of the East.

Michael Thorpe in Matthew Arnold remarks, "What is certain is that Arnold found in his favourite reading of Eastern travels and legends an ideal tragic subject, whose essential simplicity and fundamental emotional appeal enabled him to combine a treatment of a 'great action' of universal significance with the expression of his deepest personal feelings. It was an ideal blend of the personal and universal which, unfortunately, Arnold could not repeat."³ According to Warren Anderson, "'Sohrab and Rustum' derives its power not from the Homeric or Virgilian externals, but from a pervasive and quintessentially Arnoldian sense of man's struggle as doomed. Clough was right to call the poem 'pseudo-antique'."⁴

"Sohrab and Rustum" has the subtitle "An Episode." In Greek drama, the *epeisodion* was the action between choric songs. Warren D. Anderson says that "it is not impossible that this original sense may have relevance here."⁵ He also talks of the probability of Arnold's using the term to mean simply a more or less self-contained portion taken from an epic. Arnold begins as if in the midst of narrative, making the first word a connective, his device is justified, since the poem relates a chapter of the Persian epic, adding material from travel books. Arnold, who ranked Homer above all other poets, set out to make his epic episode Homeric in narrative method and texture. The poem is full of Homeric echoes and imitations.

The action of the poem is focused upon the fatal encounter of father and son, and is completed within the course of one day, from Sohrab's rising in the 'first grey of morning' to return of 'a cold fog, with night' and Sohrab lying dead 'on the bloody sand,' his father, Rustum stretched mourning beside him. The development of the story may be divided into three parts. In the first part, which may be termed 'The Challenge,' we have in the form of conversation between Sohrab and Peran Wisa, an account of who Sohrab is and what is his real object in fighting with the Tartar ranks and his motive in seeking single encounter with some noble Persian chief (lines 1-301). In the second part, which may be called 'The Combat,' we have an account of the cruel and fateful encounter between Sohrab and Rustum— father and son, joining in mortal struggle in utter ignorance of each other's identity, though each feels strangely attracted towards the other (lines 302-526). In the third part, which may be termed 'The Disillusion,' we have the slow dawning of knowledge on Rustum's mind and the bitter grief of father and son (lines 527-892).

If the action of the poem is considered individually, its meaning has to do with fate, and it is in this respect that Arnold's skill in composition is apparent. For he has devised a story in which two human hearts, longing for union, are

thwarted in that longing and are finally brought together only in the moment of death. In a way, Arnold affirms that everything in the world is predestined. Here is an obvious echo of the *Bhagavad Gita* which says that whatever is happening and what ever will happen in future has already been predetermined by the Almighty God. When the son is killed by his own father, Rustum, he says, "But it was writ in Heaven that this should be".⁶ The irony of this action is very well exploited by Arnold. From the first moment we hear of Sohrab's quest of his famous father and his hope of greeting him on some well-fought field. It is ironic that Sohrab should resist Peran Wisa's advice to seek his father in peace and should persist in seeking him in the only way that will bring about his own death. It is ironic that Gudurz should take the very method of persuading Rustum to do battle which will lead him to do battle incognito and so prepare for the catastrophe. It is ironic that when Sohrab and Rustum feel in their hearts a prompting to drop their arms and embrace upon the sands, they do not do so. The renowned warrior, in pity, urges the young man to forgo battle and be as a son to him, and Sohrab, rushing to embrace his knees, asks if he is not Rustum. When Rustum's club misses its stroke and drops from his hand, Sohrab chivalrously spares his unarmed opponent, and touched again by a filial feeling, he urges a truce. It seems as if heaven and nature took part in "that unnatural conflict:" sudden darkness, wind, and sand envelop the two. In accordance with Aristotle's ideal pattern of tragedy, the "recognition" and the "peripeteia" are simultaneous. The recognition scene is supremely ironic. Thundering out the name "Rustum" which he thinks will be a word of fear, the older warrior hurls his weapon, but Sohrab, hearing the name in surprise and joy, drops his shield, and receives a fatal wound. The moment of recognition is the moment of death, and the dying son tries to lighten the grief of his father, now convinced of his identity. Sohrab points out at their predestined fates— "thou art Heaven's unconscious / hand" (325). He acts like Krishna inspiring Arjuna to face the war courageously and do the required action, even if the opponent is his own blood relation. In the very same way, Sohrab 'with a grave mild voice' shows the direction of life to his shaken father, trapped in a crisis, that is physical, spiritual as well as filial. He says:

thou must live.

For some are born to do great deeds, and live,

As some are born to be obscured, and die.

Do thou the deeds I die too young to do,

And reap a second glory in thine age. (327)

And finally, Rustum sits on the bloody sand beside the body of his son, his cloak over his face, while the armies have their meals. It is a cold, foggy and a dark night.

Rustum and Sohrab, both display a pride and a fierceness that belong as much to the *Iliad* as to the *Shahnamah*, for these are indispensable common properties of the epic. The spirit of action in both the valiant warriors is tremendous. Their love and fierceness for action and duty is very similar to what Krishna wants Arjuna to learn in the *Gita* "Do thine allotted task!"⁷ Both the father and the son do not, for a single moment, think about the consequences, but are haunted by the fierceness of action. They do not sleep for a moment and keep reflecting upon their duty as a patriotic soldier. This sense of action is what Arnold yearned for himself, and struggled to achieve under the influence of the *Gita*.

At the end of the poem, the tower is fallen, and Rustum lies like a "black granite pillar" prone in the sand. But the garden is also desecrated, and Sohrab is like a white violet gathered by heedless children, or like a rich hyacinth cut by

some unskillful gardener's hand. Where Sohrab is spring, Rustum is autumn and winter. His club was brought to him by the winter storms, and his spear blazed bright and baleful like the autumn star. Hence, in the conflict between them he is in his element where Sohrab is not. The conflict occurs in winter and on the Oxus sands.

Arnold's own attempt to poise his life by reconciling opposites and seeking spiritual solace from the *Gita* is defined in a way through both Sohrab and Rustum in the poem. Both the father and the son "poise" their lives by incorporating their opposites within themselves. Sohrab finds in Rustum a father who is not harsh, but soft and tender. And Rustum finds in Sohrab a son who is not effeminate but a true warrior. In this discovery, they exchange symbols. The dry, sterile thunder of Rustum's wrath has released itself in the rain of tears, and with this rain he waters the rich hyacinth, which he has slain. But unlike the youth in a Greek legend, Sohrab is not reborn as a flower. Rather he asks Rustum to lay him in the lovely earth and heap a stately mound above his bones and "plant a far-seen pillar over all" – a pillar which will replace the "black granite pillar" of the now fallen Rustum, and will confirm to the world that he is Rustum's son. The final reconciliation of the conflict is of course effected by the end-symbol of the river Oxus. Through this symbol our attention is turned away from the scene of death to the one that signifies life, and we are told that life itself goes on despite this tragedy in which one life is extinguished. For the first reach of the river, in the high "mountain-cradle" of Pamere, where it flows "right for the polar star," has the clarity and fixity of purpose of Sohrab's youth ; and the second, where "sands begin / To hem his watery march" and he becomes "a foil'd circuitous wanderer," takes us into Rustum's world, the world of the desert. Finally, the waters are released into the sea, which is their "luminous home" and from whose floor the "new bathed stars emerge," just as Sohrab and Rustum find peace and a kind of new birth in their reconciliation upon the sand. The river comprehends and transcends all these things. It is neither Age nor Youth, Winter nor Spring, Life nor Death, Joy nor Gloom, but is the cyclical movement of them all. In this way it shows that the conflict is but "an episode" in the life-process and that the river itself floats on, rejoicing under the stars. The symbol of the river greatly reflects the oriental philosophy of life, death and rebirth. Nature, being a detached observer, carries on with its natural flow. Man, on the other hand, striving for a reconciliation of opposites and attaining balance, ends his life to wait for a new one.

Arnold himself, as a poet, was satisfied by the subject he had chosen and the final form of his poem. In one of the letters to his mother written in May 1853, he wrote :

All my spare time has been spent on a poem (Sohrab and Rustum) which I have just finished, and which I think by far the best thing I have yet done, and that it will be generally liked, though one never can be sure of this. I have had the greatest pleasure in composing it—a rare thing with me, and as I think, a good test of the pleasure what you write is likely to afford to others ; but then the story is a very noble and excellent one.⁸

Arnold copied into his note-book as late as 1882, under the revealing heading "Prose and Poetry," this verdict upon his life's work by a contemporary critic:

Sohrab and Rustum or The Sick King in Bokhara does more for culture than a world of essays and reviews, and disquisitions on the hideous middle class....⁹

It has been said by numerous critics that "Sohrab and Rustum" owes much of its power to Arnold's relationship to his father. Dr. Arnold, to be sure, had been more religious and scholarly than poetical, and he had felt prolonged anxiety about his son's lack of studious zeal. As Arnold the critic became more and more engaged in enlightening his countrymen,

he paid continual tributes in his letters to his father's rare qualities of mind and leadership. "Rugby Chapel" was a heart-felt eulogy of his character and his career, shaped appropriately in terms of a mountain climb, and in the form of the active friend and helper of mankind. In "Sohrab and Rustum," although Arnold made no conscious autobiographical connection, but he drew on a very rich experience of filial love mixed with anxiety about his identity and aims.

CONCLUSIONS

"Sohrab and Rustum," obeying the condition of complete action, greatly satisfied him. For Arnold, who was once titled as a "helpless, cheerless doubter," it was the best he had yet done, and which he had "the greatest pleasure in composing", it was "a rare thing with me, and, as I think, a good test of the pleasure what you write is likely to afford to others."¹⁰ Satisfying the conditions laid by him in the Preface, the poem has no introspective brooding upon the poet's mental development—no sickly analysis of his "misery's birth and growth." From beginning to end the poem is concerned with human actions and human situations, although the situations are full of pathos and make a complete tragedy.

Although Arnold did not continue writing such poems in his later and more mature years, for he was always aware of the fact that some of the best poetry of the world—the poetry of Shelley, Wordsworth and Goethe—does not deal with human action in any sense of the term. But "Sohrab and Rustum" was just what the "complaining millions" needed as a relief from their cares. Limpidity, placidity, complacency pervade it from the very beginning—the features that Arnold was perhaps gifted by the *Gita*, and he wrote the poem in the same spirit.

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